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Adjusting to Single Fatherhood

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The role of fathers as primary or solo caregivers may often be portrayed as the stuff of outrageous screenplays—think “Mr. Mom” or “Mrs. Doubtfire.” But single fathers are hardly as rare, or as unlikely, as the pop culture hits of the past may have led us to believe.

According to a 2006 U.S. Census Bureau release, there are 2.3 million single fathers in the United States, up almost six times from the 1970 figure of 400,000. Analyzing the numbers from a different perspective, 18 percent of single parents living with kids are men, the Census Bureau reports.

Despite the national numbers, you may feel alone and overwhelmed if you’re a newly single father. In addition to adjusting to your role, you may still be grappling with the circumstances that led you to this new place. Rather than trying to be “Mr. Mom,” consider the suggestions below and concentrate on being a capable dad.

Be there

Unfortunately, single fathers may have to overcome the “deadbeat dad” stereotype. In fact, according to a 1996 survey sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics, single fathers living with children are almost equally as likely as their single mother counterparts to be highly involved in their children’s schools—46 percent versus 49 percent.

Divorced fathers, for example, usually don’t retreat from their families because they don’t love their kids and want to be with them, or because they don’t want to be a good parent. But it can happen because of a sad combination of factors including a rocky relationship with the former spouse and personal feelings of helplessness, writes Mary Ellen Hannibal in *Good Parenting Through Your Divorce*.

The bottom line for all single fathers: Stay connected. This is crucial for you, and especially for your children’s growth. Don’t give up on spending time with your children, even if your attempts sometimes feel futile. Except in cases of abuse, notes Hannibal, it’s healthier for kids to have both parents in their lives. Hannibal and other professionals who have written about the subject suggest that fathers:

- **Get involved.** Whenever possible, be active at school and with extracurricular activities. Meet your child’s teachers and other parents, sign up for the school

newsletter or e-mail updates, and attend parent-teacher meetings and school events.

- **Get to know your kids' friends.** Do more than learn their names; you'll want to spend some time with them. You'll feel better about safety issues, and also have some common knowledge as the basis for discussions with your kids.
- **Get the 411.** Keep the names of your kids' doctors and dentists on hand, along with any other critical information that may not come up on a daily basis.
- **Get together.** Most importantly, spend time with your kids. Quality time is important, not just quantity. And the price tag doesn't matter. Enjoying everyday activities, such as hiking or cooking, can be just as nice—or better—than an expensive trip.

Be in control

Remember that your kids will look to you for guidance during difficult times. Stay in control of the situation—don't let your anger or sadness negatively impact your kids.

- **Keep it positive.** If you're divorced, don't fight or speak badly of your spouse in front of your children. And, don't compel them to choose one parent over the other, or to "spy" on your spouse.
- **Be a strong parent.** Chances are, you'll need your kids to help out around the house. But, don't let your kids become your sole pillar of strength or your psychologist. Remember that you're the parent who should be providing support for your kids.
- **Keep it real.** Honestly discuss circumstances and emotions with your children. Be a good listener, and let them know that their thoughts and feelings are valid.
- **Seek support from loved ones, support groups or professional sources.** Help won't always come to you—sometimes you have to ask for it.

Be consistent

Stay consistent. Strive to provide stability in your children's lives.

- **Don't disrupt their regular activities or move them to a new school.** This can make a very difficult time even more stressful for kids. Outside of school, make sure the children stay in contact with their relatives.
- **Don't make empty promises.** Making pie-in-the-sky pronouncements will only set your children up for disappointment.
- **Provide steady discipline**—your child needs a parent, not a best friend.

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